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Historiography, Philosophy of History and the Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy

Michael Beaney

Abstract

This article has three main interconnected aims. First, I illustrate the historiographical conceptions of three early analytic philosophers: Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein. Second, I consider some of the historiographical debates that have been generated by the recent historical turn in analytic philosophy, looking at the work of Scott Soames and Hans-Johann Glock, in particular. Third, I discuss Arthur Danto's *Analytic Philosophy of History*, published 50 years ago, and argue for a reinvigorated analytic philosophy of history.

Keywords

historiography of analytic philosophy, historical turn in analytic philosophy, analytic philosophy of history, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Danto

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1 Introduction

Analytic philosophy is widely regarded as ahistoricist in methodology, and indeed, even as anti-historicist. Certainly, if we consider the official pronouncements of some of the leading figures of analytic philosophy, especially in its early phase, then one can easily come away with the impression that 'historical' understanding and approaches are deemed of limited significance in philosophy. Yet even the most supposedly ahistoricist of analytic philosophers make use of history of philosophy in their work, and the question is not so much

why they do not use history of philosophy as rather how and why they use it as they do.¹ Historiographical conceptions and methods – however crude they may be – are not absent in analytic philosophy, in other words, but are presupposed and operate implicitly in various ways. The first aim of this paper is to illustrate this by looking briefly at the methodologies of three of the founders of analytic philosophy: Frege (§2), Russell (§3), and Wittgenstein (§4).

Since the early 1990s there has been a movement within analytic philosophy to take history of philosophy more seriously, and especially its own history. The reasons for this are complex, but one main reason has been the growing sense of the distance between the concerns and projects of analytic philosophers today and those of its founders now more than a century ago. I say something about the historical turn that has taken place in analytic philosophy (§5), before looking at some of the debates it has generated about the relationship between philosophy and history of philosophy. In particular, I take the example of Scott Soames' 2003 work on the history of analytic philosophy (§6) and discuss Hans-Johann Glock's account of forms of historicism (§7). This, then, is the second aim of this paper: to elucidate the historical turn in analytic philosophy and consider some of the debates that this has inspired.

In the final part of the paper I turn to Arthur Danto's *Analytic Philosophy of History*, which was published in 1965. I outline its main ideas (§8) and show how they can be applied to the points made earlier in the paper (§9). I conclude with a plea for a reinvigorated analytic philosophy of history (§10). The third aim of the paper, then, is to revisit Danto's work and bring it back into the debates about historiography inspired by the historical turn in analytic philosophy.

¹ The term 'history' is used in three main senses. It can mean a (relevant) series of past events, a (relevant) account of such a series, or the discipline of writing such accounts. Context usually makes clear which sense is intended. Generally, though, I shall use it in the first sense with the definite article, as in speaking of 'the history of philosophy' to denote philosophy's actual past, in the second sense with either the indefinite or no article, as in speaking of 'writing a history of philosophy', and in the third sense with no article, as in speaking of 'doing history of philosophy'. Sometimes both the second and third senses may be involved, as in speaking of 'using history of philosophy', but no confusion need result. Where unclarity might arise, I shall add an appropriate qualification in parentheses.

2 Frege and the role of historical elucidation

Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) is now generally recognized as one of the founders of analytic philosophy. His main project was to demonstrate the logicist thesis that arithmetic could be reduced to logic, and this required the development of logical theory for which Frege is rightly accorded his place in the history of analytic philosophy. The new logical theory was introduced in Frege's first book, *Begriffsschrift*, published in 1879. It received poor reviews, however, and Frege was encouraged to present his ideas informally before seeking to demonstrate the logicist thesis formally. The result was *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, his second book, which appeared in 1884. What is significant about this book is that the first half is devoted to an examination and critique of previous views of number in the history of mathematics and philosophy – among others, those of Euclid, Kant, Leibniz, Mill, Newton, Schröder, Locke, Berkeley, Hobbes, Hume, and Descartes. Frege may have used a collection as his source for the works he cites (Baumann 1868), but he clearly saw the need to engage with previous views in order to motivate his own.

In his own philosophical writings, Frege came to stress the role of what he called 'elucidation' ('Erläuterung'). Not everything can be defined, at least without circularity; so something else is needed to make clear the sense of the most basic terms, such as – in Frege's case – 'function', 'object', and 'truth-value'. This is where elucidation comes in: terms are explained by using them in context, gesturing at their sense and relying on a "meeting of minds", as Frege put it (1914, p. 224/1997, p. 313). Frege's three most famous essays, 'Function and Concept', 'On Sense and Reference', and 'On Concept and Object', all published in the early 1890s, should be seen as essentially *elucidatory* in precisely this way: they are intended to make clear the sense of the key terms of Frege's philosophy, without which his own logicist project would not be understood.

For Frege, elucidation occurs only at the pre-theoretical stage, preparing the conceptual building-blocks for theory-construction. But this does not diminish its importance, for without clarity about its most basic terms, no theory will be convincing. If we bear in mind the advice that Frege heeded in writing the

Foundations, then we can see that elucidation will inevitably have an historical dimension. For the most basic terms one uses will need to be explained by clarifying their relation to any similar terms used by previous thinkers. Indeed, Frege himself pointed out that he was using terms such as ‘function’, ‘concept’, and ‘object’ in slightly different senses to those that the terms had had in earlier uses. To capture this, I have suggested that we talk of ‘historical elucidation’ (Beaney 2006a). The articulation of any philosophical theory or view requires fixing the senses of key terms, and given the disputes that there have been in the history of philosophy about the senses of key philosophical terms, part of the elucidation required will involve distinguishing the senses intended from the senses that others have expressed in using the same or similar terms in the past.

In his introduction to the *Foundations*, Frege had famously criticized ‘historical’ investigations:

The historical mode of investigation, which seeks to trace the development of things from which to understand their nature, is certainly legitimate; but it also has its limitations. If everything were in continual flux and nothing remained fixed and eternal, then knowledge of the world would cease to be possible and everything would be thrown into confusion. We imagine, it seems, that concepts originate in the individual mind like leaves on a tree, and we suppose that their nature can be understood by investigating their origin and seeking to explain them psychologically through the working of the human mind. But this conception makes everything subjective, and taken to its logical conclusion, abolishes truth. What is called the history of concepts is really either a history of our knowledge of concepts or of the meanings of words. Often it is only through enormous intellectual work, which can last for hundreds of years, that knowledge of a concept in its purity is achieved, by peeling off the alien clothing that conceals it from the mind’s eye. (1884, p. VII/1997, p. 88)

Leaving aside the Platonist view of concepts that this passage suggests (in opposition to a psychologistic view), we can agree with Frege that “enormous intellectual work” may be required to get clear about key philosophical concepts. What Frege describes as coming to know the relevant concept “in its purity” may be less controversially expressed as fixing the sense of a term as used in a given context (say, in pursuing a particular philosophical project). However it is described, though, ‘historical’ investigations may actually be essential – not by explaining the concepts psychologically but by carefully charting the changes in senses of the relevant terms. Frege may not have done this himself in any

systematic way, but he certainly recognized the need to locate his own views about arithmetic and logic in the historical space of previous views.

3 Russell and the use of rational reconstruction

Like Frege, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) was a logicist, at least after his rebellion against British idealism at the turn of the twentieth century. In pursuing his own brand of logicism, however, his philosophical ideas went through many changes, from naïve realist views to complex combinations of reductionist, eliminativist, constructionist, and idealist views, inspired by his seminal theory of descriptions, which was first articulated in 1905. This is not the place to offer even a sketch of these changes. What I want to focus on instead is the book he published in 1900: *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*. Exemplifying what is now called ‘rational reconstruction’, this can be regarded as the first work of ‘analytic’ history of philosophy.²

This book was written in the short period in which Russell rejected British idealism, and indeed, played a crucial role in that rejection. Russell attacked, in particular, what he called ‘the doctrine of internal relations’ – that “Every relation is grounded in the natures of the related terms”, as he put it in his later account of his rebellion (1959, p. 43). Russell saw this doctrine as characteristic of both British idealism (and especially Bradley’s monism) and Leibniz’s monadism, and he came to form his own realist views about relations in repudiating this doctrine. His book thus illustrates very well how philosophical positions are often developed by thinking through and criticizing the views of earlier philosophers.

Russell proceeds by identifying five premises that he argues generate the whole of Leibniz’s philosophy but which are also responsible for the contradictions that undermine it. The first premise he formulates as the claim that every proposition has a subject and a predicate, and the second and third, in effect, imply what we can call Leibniz’s ‘containment principle’ – that the truth of a proposition consists in the containment of the predicate concept in the subject

² For an account of the development of the idea of rational reconstruction, see Beaney 2013d.

concept.³ Russell argues that this commits Leibniz to denying the reality of relations, and criticizes him for this. According to Russell, the fundamental assumption that Leibniz shared with Bradley was that all propositions are reducible to the subject–predicate form, so that his criticism of Leibniz was equally an attack on Bradley.

Russell's critique of both Bradley and Leibniz is highly controversial: his interpretations are often uncharitable, to say the least.⁴ But his book illustrates rational reconstruction very well. Russell reconstructs Leibniz's philosophy by showing how it follows from as limited a set of premises as possible – not the whole of his philosophy, perhaps, but as many of Leibniz's views as can be accommodated, bearing in mind that those views were scattered across a host of texts written at different times, as Russell points out (1900, pp. 1–3). This conception of how to do history of philosophy, however, makes numerous assumptions itself. One assumption is that the axiomatic method, which may be appropriate in Euclidean geometry, can be successfully applied to philosophy. Russell reports that he had been inspired by Euclid from the age of eleven (1975, p. 30), and even before his conversion to logicism, he had been concerned to identify the axioms of mathematics.⁵ So he was clearly predisposed to the application of the Euclidean method to history of philosophy. To be sure, this method had influenced Spinoza, for example, in proceeding *more geometrico* in his *Ethics*.⁶ But most philosophical views are not developed or expounded by following the axiomatic method, so its use in history of philosophy remains an assumption in need of support.

Support is offered by the distinction between psychological genesis and logical justification, which is crucial to the idea of rational reconstruction. This is made clear by Russell himself in the preface to his book on Leibniz, in

³ Cf. Russell 1900, pp. 3–4. I ignore here the qualifications needed in the case of existential propositions. For Leibniz's statement of this principle, see e.g. his letter to Arnauld of 14 July 1686 (tr. in Leibniz 1973, p. 62).

⁴ For critical discussion of Russell's attack on Bradley, see Candlish 2007; and for Russell's critique of Leibniz, see Hunter 1993.

⁵ See the papers in Russell 1990, Parts II–IV.

⁶ In this regard it deserves noting that Russell had read Spinoza in the years immediately preceding his work on Leibniz. Cf. Blackwell 1985, pp. 48–51.

distinguishing a “mainly historical” from a “mainly philosophical” conception of history of philosophy. The former addresses questions of influence, growth, causes, and the wider context, while the latter seeks “to discover what are the great types of possible philosophies” and work out which is them is true. Russell elaborates on the latter as follows:

in such enquiries the philosopher is no longer explained psychologically: he is examined as the advocate of what he holds to be a body of philosophic truth. By what process of development he came to this opinion, though in itself an important and interesting question, is logically irrelevant to the inquiry how far the opinion itself is correct (1900, p. xvi).

Russell can be taken here to be speaking for many subsequent analytic philosophers. The legitimacy of the distinction between genesis and justification may be widely assumed today, but it is an assumption nevertheless and one whose own justification is not considered as much as it should. We will return to this in due course.

4 Wittgenstein and the critique of language

In his first work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) claimed that all philosophy is ‘critique of language’ (4.0031). Most philosophical questions and propositions, he thought, were nonsense (*unsinnig*), arising from misunderstanding of the logic of our language (4.003), and the task of philosophy – properly pursued – was to show this (4.112, 6.53). Supporting this view of the task of philosophy was a conception of language as already in ‘perfect logical order’ (5.5563); the problem was just a mismatch between the surface grammatical form and the underlying logical form of ordinary propositions, a mismatch that he took Russell’s theory of descriptions to have well illustrated (4.0031). Logic was taken as a given: not only does its form mirror the form of the world (2.18), but it is a precondition for having any legitimate thought or experience at all (3.03, 5.552).

On this conception, it is hard to see what role ‘historical considerations’ could play in philosophy. Wittgenstein does not mention such considerations at

all, but he does talk about the danger of getting entangled in “inessential psychological investigations” (4.1121), and the same would presumably have been said about ‘historical’ investigations. He undoubtedly shared Frege’s and Russell’s anti-psychologism, and would have agreed that questions of genesis (whether historical or psychological) were irrelevant to issues of logical justification.

In his later work, Wittgenstein rejected his earlier view of logic as somehow given a priori, but he continued to regard philosophy as ‘critique of language’. As he famously wrote in the *Philosophical Investigations*, “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (§109). He also continued to reject psychologism, but his view of ‘historical considerations’ undergoes a subtle change. He does not ‘do’ history of philosophy in any meaningful sense, though he occasionally takes the remarks of other philosophers – such as Plato or Frege or William James or Russell – as examples of propositions requiring philosophical critique. But Wittgenstein does talk at several points in his later writings of the ‘natural history’ of mankind, understood as what provides the context or ‘form of life’ in which our linguistic activities gain their sense (see e.g. *PI*, §§ 25, 415). So an obvious suggestion is that history of philosophy can play a role in philosophy in making clear our forms of life.

The most important passage in which Wittgenstein refers to ‘natural history’ in the *Philosophical Investigations* is the following:

If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in that in nature which is the basis of grammar?—Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes of the formation of concepts; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history—since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). But if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize—then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him. (II, xii, p. 230)

Wittgenstein here stresses that he is not to be understood as doing either natural science or natural history, in the sense of offering ‘explanations’ of the concepts we have or of their supposed ‘necessity’. One of his aims is to help us to appreciate the contingency of our linguistic practices – their basis in our forms of life – to defuse claims that we might be tempted to make about how things must be. This can be done by inventing ‘fictitious natural history’, as Wittgenstein puts it, or by imagining things to be very different from how they actually are – by ‘thought experiments’, as we might now describe it. In my view, however, this does not rule out the possibility of using science or history in such philosophical critique. Indeed, in many ways, taking real historical cases can be more convincing because it shows that human beings really did do different things – and have different concepts – in the past. Admittedly, such approaches can be taken to suggest that our beliefs are ‘explained’ by seeing how they are ‘caused’ by the relevant circumstances; but as long as we resist this kind of ‘explanation’, genuine as opposed to fictitious natural history can serve Wittgenstein’s task just as well. Perhaps, for certain purposes, we may need to imagine things radically different from how they have ever been in history in order to make us appreciate the contingency of some of our most fundamental activities; but this does not mean that natural science or natural history cannot be used at all.

5 The historical turn in analytic philosophy

If we consider the work of the three most important founders of analytic philosophy, Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein, then there is good reason to characterize their own conceptions of philosophy as ahistoricist and even as anti-historicist (in the way that they were anti-psychologistic). The history of philosophy shows, however, that there is frequently a mismatch between a philosopher’s official methodological views and their actual practice. Both Frege and Russell used history of philosophy in their own work, and even Wittgenstein drew on the remarks of selected earlier philosophers in pursuing his project of philosophical critique. Something similar can be said of many subsequent analytic philosophers.

The ahistoricism of analytic philosophy was criticized from the very beginning. Ernst Cassirer, for example, in reviewing Russell's book on Leibniz in an appendix to his own book on Leibniz, published in 1902, attacked Russell's fixation on identifying contradictions. Taking Leibniz's conception of substance as his central example, Cassirer argued that it looked both backwards, in reworking the traditional Aristotelian conception, and forwards, in giving it a more dynamic character. He writes: "It would be entirely one-sided and unhistorical to judge this opposition, on which, as it were, the whole inner tension of the system rests, as simply a contradiction" (1902, p. 539). Sensitivity to 'tensions' in philosophical thinking, which is often what drives its development, is characteristic of more historically-minded philosophers; and Cassirer is quite right to stress its importance.

As analytic philosophy itself developed – driven not only by its own internal tensions but also in responding to external criticisms and rival views – it began to be seen, by both its adherents and critics, as a philosophical tradition in its own right. This itself embodies historical self-consciousness. Analytic philosophy – in its British variety – came to be seen as having originated in opposition to British idealism, which had been dominant at the end of the nineteenth century. When it broadened to include logical empiricism, it was seen as opposed to 'continental' forms of idealism, more generally, as well as to other European traditions, such as neo-Kantianism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. The whole self-identity of analytic philosophy, then, has an essential historical dimension: it is partly individuated by its relations in historical space and time.

Significantly, it was not until the 1930s that the terms 'analytic philosopher' and 'analytic philosophy' were used in anything like their current senses. John Wisdom was the first to use 'analytic philosopher' in his *Interpretation and Analysis* of 1931, and R. G. Collingwood was the first to use 'analytic philosophy' in his *Essay on Philosophical Method* of 1933. In the latter case, what deserves note is that it was used in *criticizing* analytic philosophy, further illustrating how terms are introduced and catch on in establishing oppositions to rival views. This was especially marked when the term

‘continental philosophy’ was introduced in 1958 by Gilbert Ryle at a conference in France that had sought to bring together British analytic philosophers and French philosophers, especially phenomenologists. The conference was not deemed a success; it only reinforced the division that was then opening up between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ philosophy – to the detriment of both sides.⁷

In 1956 the first book on the history of analytic philosophy was published: J. O. Urmson’s *Philosophical Analysis: Its Development between the Two World Wars*. What Urmson understood as ‘analytic philosophy’ was a combination of logical atomism (as elaborated by Russell and Wittgenstein in the 1910s and early 1920s) and logical positivism, and his book was actually written as its obituary, in clearing the ground for the new ‘ordinary language philosophy’ that was then emerging in Oxford. The term ‘analytic philosophy’, however, was already being used to include ordinary language philosophy as well as the new forms of logical empiricism that were being developed at the same time in America, most notably, by W. V. O. Quine. By the end of the 1960s analytic philosophy had firmly established itself as the leading philosophical tradition in the English-speaking world.

In the 1970s ordinary language philosophy began to give way to philosophical theorizing based on more technically sophisticated philosophy of language, exemplified in the so-called ‘Davidsonian boom’ that reached Oxford from the States. This stimulated increased interest in Frege, seen as the father of semantic theory by Michael Dummett, in particular. Key here was the publication in 1973 of Dummett’s pioneering book, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*. As an interpretation of Frege, however, the book proved controversial. Dummett’s claim that Frege was a philosopher of language is now seen by many as anachronistic: Frege was primarily a mathematician, logician, and philosopher of mathematics who developed ideas – such as the distinction between sense and reference – that were to form the basis of modern analytic philosophy of language, but that is rather different.

⁷ See Ryle 1962. For an account of this conference, see Overgaard 2010. I comment briefly on this, and the unfortunate choice of the term ‘continental philosophy’, in Beaney 2013c, pp. 49–50.

Hans Sluga was one of the first to attack Dummett's interpretation in his own book on Frege of 1980, in which he argued that Frege needed to be understood in his German context, influenced by earlier philosophers such as Hermann Lotze. *Frege: Logical Excavations*, by Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker, published in 1984, offered further sustained critique of Dummett's views from a Wittgensteinian perspective. Analogous criticisms came to be made of interpretations of the other founders of analytic philosophy. Four books might be singled out here as especially significant: Gordon Baker's *Wittgenstein, Frege and the Vienna Circle* (1988), Thomas Baldwin's *G. E. Moore* (1990), Peter Hylton's *Russell, Idealism, and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (1990), and Nicholas Griffin's *Russell's Idealist Apprenticeship* (1991). All of these books were much more sensitive to the actual historical development of the relevant philosophers' views, and combined detailed analysis of the philosophical arguments with scholarly attention to issues of context and influence.

By the early 1990s, then, we can certainly say that an historical turn had taken place in analytic philosophy – at any rate, in some quarters. This historical turn coincided with increasing debate about the relationship between analytic philosophy and (the discipline of) history of philosophy, more generally; indeed, the two mutually reinforced one other. A collection of essays edited by Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, *Philosophy in History*, published in 1984, was influential in this regard. Combining historiographical essays with case studies, it offered a variety of views on the fundamental question of the relationship between 'rational reconstructions' and 'historical reconstructions', as Rorty called them – following the distinction drawn by Russell, as we have seen, in his 1900 book on Leibniz. Since then other collections have been published, most notably, *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy*, edited by Tom Sorell and John Rogers (2005), and *The Historical Turn in Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Erich Reck (2013). The latter appeared in a series devoted to the history of analytic philosophy, the first series of its kind, which had been established in 2007.⁸

⁸ For the books that have been published in the series, see the series website: <http://www.palgrave.com/series/history-of-analytic-philosophy/HAP/>.

6 Historiographical debates in history of analytic philosophy

Today history of analytic philosophy is recognized as a branch of philosophy – and an area of history of philosophy – in its own right. This is not to say that there is agreement as to how it is to be pursued, however. Historiographical disputes are as heated here as in any other area of history of philosophy. To illustrate this, I will briefly consider the controversy that was generated by the publication in 2003 of Scott Soames' two-volume work, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*. Billed as a 'history of analytic philosophy', it might more accurately be described as a series of rational reconstructions of selected canonical texts in the history of analytic philosophy. Among 'mainstream' analytic philosophers, the work was generally commended as clear and insightful, while more 'serious' historians of analytic philosophy roundly criticized it for its historical omissions and distortions and its methodological failings. The first criticism is illustrated by Soames' failure to discuss either Frege or Carnap in the two volumes; the second is illustrated by the lack of any adequate examination of the concept of analysis itself, despite the title of the work.⁹

In 2006 there was an 'Author meets Critics' session at the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, and a symposium on both Volume I and Volume II of Soames' work was published in *Philosophical Studies* in 2006 and 2007, respectively. In his replies to his critics, Soames distinguished his own "philosophically and pedagogically motivated" project to "develop a broad and useable picture of where we are now and how we got here" from the antiquarianism of "history-for-history's-sake" which focuses on "minor works, unpublished manuscripts, and private correspondence" (2006, pp. 645, 654–5). The contrast drawn here is a familiar one in debates about the relationship between analytic philosophy and history of philosophy. On the view Soames is peddling, analytic philosophers engage in 'real' philosophy, attempting to

⁹ Cf. Beaney 2006b; 2013c, p. 55; 2013d, §5.3. Soames has since published the first volume of a new, projected five-volume work on the history of analytic philosophy (2014). This volume begins, more appropriately, with two chapters on Frege. For a critique of these chapters, however, see Beaney 2015, in a symposium dedicated to Soames' new book.

discover the ‘truth’ about the world, thought, language, and their interrelationships, while historians of philosophy just try to work out what previous philosophers thought.

The contrast Soames draws is deeply flawed, not only in itself but also as a characterization of what good history of philosophy, and not least good history of analytic philosophy, involves. Historians of philosophy try to work out what previous philosophers thought not for its own sake but for the light it sheds on current problems, concepts, and debates. Looking at “minor works, unpublished manuscripts, and private correspondence” may help reveal presuppositions that are hidden in ‘official’ texts. Exploring the broader context may also help uncover assumptions that are taken for granted by all participants in a particular debate at a given time, and which need to be brought out and examined in order to resolve or take the next step in the debate.

This is not to say that Soames’ own project is misguided or that rational reconstructions, in general, are illegitimate in history of philosophy. On the contrary, rational reconstructions are essential in making sense of the arguments and views investigated. But they are only part of the story. They need to be complemented by historical reconstructions, which help support, refine, and elaborate them. Historical reconstructions, in turn, require rational reconstructions to direct them: to extract the right information from the mass of historical data, the right questions must be asked. Elsewhere I have suggested that what is needed is ‘dialectical reconstruction’, which combines rational and historical reconstruction in seeking to understand the dynamic development of a philosopher’s thought.¹⁰ As Cassirer stressed in criticizing Russell’s book on Leibniz, we need to be sensitive to the tensions that drive philosophical thinking, and this requires narrative approaches as well as argumentation.

7 Forms of historicism

Soames’ attempt at a history of analytic philosophy is a poor advert for good analytic history of philosophy. Better exemplars have already been mentioned:

¹⁰ See especially Beaney 1996, pp. 3ff.; 2013d, pp. 253–4.

Peter Hylton's (1990) and Nicholas Griffin's (1991) works on Russell, to name just two. There are also far more sophisticated accounts of analytic historiography of philosophy. I shall say something briefly in this section about Hans-Johann Glock's recent discussion in chapter 4 of *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (2008). Although, in answering the main question of his book, he fails to do justice to the ways in which analytic philosophy is 'analytic' (see Beaney 2011), I am in substantial agreement with a lot of what he says. His discussion of historiography is especially helpful, although here, too, I think, he does insufficient justice to the historical nature of philosophy, analytic philosophy included.

Chapter 4 is entitled 'History and Historiography', and Glock's main aim is to show how analytic philosophy cannot be defined by any particular approach it takes to history. Analytic philosophy has often been charged with historiophobia and anachronism, Glock argues, but in neither case is this characteristic of analytic philosophy – even though they might be found in the work of some analytic philosophers. There is no reason for analytic philosophers to reject historicism, which Glock defines as "any position that promotes historical thinking in philosophy and warns against ignoring or distorting the past" (p. 89). But we need to distinguish three forms of 'historicism', Glock argues, of which only the third should be endorsed, the first being misguided and the second unproven. The first is 'intrinsic historicism', according to which philosophy is intrinsically historical; the second is 'instrumental historicism', according to which study of the past is an indispensable means to philosophizing; and the third is 'weak historicism', according to which study of the past is merely useful in philosophizing (p. 90).

Few philosophers would deny weak historicism, though Glock reports Wittgenstein's remark that "I see that whenever I read a philosophical book: it doesn't improve my thoughts at all, it makes them worse" (p. 92). Instrumental historicism, as Glock formulates it, permits a variety of interpretations, depending on what precisely is meant by 'study of the past' and 'philosophizing'. We can give it a reading on which it palpably comes out false. If by 'study of the past' we mean seriously reading at least one philosophical text, and if by 'philosophizing' we mean asking at least one question generally recognized as

philosophical (such as ‘How do I know anyone else sees the world as I do?’ or ‘Does God exist’) and offering some kind of answer to it, however half-baked or confused, then instrumental historicism is false. On the other hand, if by ‘study of the past’ we mean learning or reading something of what someone in the past thought, and ‘philosophizing’ means expressing one’s thinking in appropriate philosophical language, then instrumental historicism would seem to be true, since we can only learn this language from others. Wittgenstein had certainly studied the works of Frege and Russell very carefully, and if he was later able to float free, it was because he had taken on board a lot of problems as intellectual ballast. Moreover, there is good and bad philosophizing, and few philosophers would claim that no study of the past at all is needed to do good philosophy.

Glock does not provide any direct arguments against instrumental historicism; he just criticizes attempts to defend it. He does, however, appeal to the neo-Kantian distinction between genesis and validity, and notes the ‘genetic fallacy’: “the mistake of deducing claims about the validity of a theory or the content of a concept from information about its historical origins” (p. 101). Glock recognizes that certain concepts are genetic, in the sense that they apply only to things of a certain origin. He gives as examples the concepts of a sunburn and of lava, and suggests that the concept of analytic philosophy itself may be such a concept. Nevertheless, he writes, “it is the *status quo alone* which determines whether a given concept is genetic or whether the actual or optimal justification of a belief or practice mentions its origin” (p. 102). So while some concepts may require study of the past in justifying their application, on Glock’s view, there is no general reason why philosophizing *requires* this in every case (ibid.).

It seems to me, however, that it is not the genetic character of a concept that determines whether ‘study of the past’ is required. The real issue is whether the concept is contested or not. If there is disagreement about what, for example, ‘analyticity’ or ‘necessity’ means, then we need to know what previous philosophers have thought in order to resolve the disagreement and/or establish our own view. Of course, we can just stipulate what we mean by a term; but if others misunderstand or challenge it, then we need to explain what is wrong with other views to justify our own, and this will require some kind of study of those views. We need only return to Frege for an obvious example (despite his

own official anti-historicism). Frege gave a definition of ‘analytic’ in his *Grundlagen* that differs from Kant’s.¹¹ He said he did not intend to introduce a new sense, “but only to capture what earlier writers, in particular *Kant*, have meant” (1884, §3). He nevertheless criticizes Kant’s own definition in defending this claim (see e.g. 1884, §88); and although Frege was no Kant scholar, it would be perverse to say that he had made no study of Kant. Many of the concepts that philosophers seek to analyse and understand are of this kind – perhaps all of them. The contestability of concepts surely lies at the heart of what drives philosophizing. No account of one’s own views could be satisfactory without some clarification of how they differ from other views. The ‘historical elucidation’ that I suggested in §2 played an important role in Frege’s writing is no less present in the work of other philosophers. Some kind of study of the past is thus indeed indispensable.

Is philosophy intrinsically historical? Again, this can be understood in various ways. But if the claim just made about the essential contestability of philosophical concepts is right,¹² then there is one sense in which it is. This is what Glock calls the ‘hermeneutic variant of intrinsic historicism’ (p. 95), originating with Hans-Georg Gadamer and endorsed by both Rorty and, more recently, Robert Brandom, a philosopher who – significantly – is still firmly rooted in the analytic tradition.¹³ Philosophy, on this view, is a conversation with tradition. As we have seen, even a philosopher as officially anti-historicist as Frege engaged in dialogue with some of his great predecessors, and this is no less true of analytic philosophers today, however much they might like to parade their rejection of historicism. Perhaps they only concern themselves with the work of other philosophers in the immediate past – responding to the latest article in *Mind* or *Analysis*, for example; but this still involves making some ‘study

¹¹ According to Kant’s official criterion, a true judgement of the form ‘*A* is *B*’ is analytic iff the predicate *B* is contained in the subject *A*. See e.g. Kant 1781/1787, A6–7/B10–11. As Frege defines it, a truth is analytic if its proof depends only on general logical laws and definitions (1884, §3).

¹² The idea of ‘essentially contested concepts’ was introduced by Gallie (1956); see also Gallie 1964, ch. 8. Many philosophical concepts are ‘essentially contested’ in Gallie’s sense, I think, although this might itself be contested. But the important point here, as Gallie himself puts it, is that “the adequate understanding of such concepts involves some appreciation of their history” (1964, p. 189).

¹³ See especially Gadamer 1960; Rorty 1980, ch. 8; Brandom 2002, ch. 1.

of the past'. So I find no grounds for endorsing only a weak historicism: philosophy has an historical dimension in a far stronger sense.

8 Danto and analytic philosophy of history

In 1965 Arthur Danto (1924–2013) published his *Analytical Philosophy of History*, which might be seen as marking the high-point of analytic philosophy of history. Its origins can be traced back to 1942, when Carl Hempel published 'The Function of General Laws in History', in which he sought to extend the 'covering-law' model of explanation to the case of history. On this model, an event is explained when a general law is specified under which the event falls. Objections to Hempel's view centred on the alleged differences between scientific and historical explanation. Influenced by Collingwood, philosophers such as W. H. Walsh, William Dray and W. B. Gallie argued for a more narrative approach, emphasizing the motives and reasons for actions of the agents involved.¹⁴ Rooted more in the analytic tradition, Morton White also argued for a narrative approach.¹⁵ In this context, Danto's book can be seen as attempting to bring narratives under the covering-law model, while resisting the intentionalism of Collingwood.

In 'The Decline and Fall of the Analytical Philosophy of History', published in 1995, however, Danto argued that Hempel's views soon became outdated once Kuhn's paradigm-changing book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, had appeared in 1962. This altered the whole nature of the debate about history and historiography, leaving Danto's book somewhat stranded on the beach of a superseded paradigm. It is true that Danto's book did not consolidate a new field of analytic philosophy of history in anything like the way that analytic aesthetics or analytic political philosophy became established in the 1960s.¹⁶ But Danto does not do justice to his own work in this later assessment. The fact that *Analytical Philosophy of History* was republished in 1985, as part of *Narration*

¹⁴ See especially Walsh 1951; Dray 1957, 1964; Gallie 1964.

¹⁵ See e.g. White 1963, which opens the collection edited by Hook 1963, in which there are other essays discussing White's views. White's essay was revised and expanded into ch. 6 of White 1965.

¹⁶ See Lamarque 2013 and Wolff 2013 for an account of the development of analytic aesthetics and analytic political philosophy, respectively.

and Knowledge, with three additional chapters, testifies to its influence well after the 1960s. But the new title is significant. What his 1965 book helped inaugurate – through his central idea of a ‘narrative sentence’ – was the narrative turn that took place in philosophy of history, literary theory, and philosophy of literature. It was this rather than the ‘analytic’ attempt to bring history under the covering-law model of explanation that was later seen as significant.¹⁷

In his introduction to a collection of essays on *The Revolution in Philosophy* published in 1956, Gilbert Ryle remarked that “History begins only when memory’s dust has settled” (p. 1), and it is often suggested that fifty years needs to elapse before we can begin to understand the past. It is now fifty years since the publication of Danto’s book, so what can we now make of it? In particular, how do things look after the historical turn in analytic philosophy? Danto did not contribute in any direct way to this historical turn; but his ideas have obvious application to what we have already said.

The idea that has the most obvious application is the “general insight” that Danto expresses at the beginning of his book: “events are continually being re-described, and their significance re-evaluated in the light of later information. And because they have this information, historians can say things that witnesses and contemporaries could not justifiably have said.” (2007 [1965], p. 11) The first ‘history’ of analytic philosophy, by J. O. Urmson (mentioned above), was indeed only written some fifty years after the perceived origins of analytic philosophy, and the originators themselves could clearly not have anticipated the effect that they had. Nor could they have claimed to have inaugurated a new philosophical tradition, as it took at least thirty years for this to begin to be established in a recognizable way.

In the very next paragraph Danto goes on: “To ask for the significance of an event, in the *historical* sense of the term, is to ask a question which can be answered only in the context of a story” (ibid.). We might call this Danto’s ‘context principle’, thereby locating it in a story that we could tell that begins

¹⁷ We have a good example here of one of Danto’s own central claims – that the significance of an event can only be judged in the light of later information. On the reception of Danto’s book, see Ankersmit 2007. As Ankersmit argues, as a philosophy of history, the book had more influence in Germany, especially through the work of Hans Michael Baumgartner.

with the context principle that Frege formulated in his *Foundations of Arithmetic*: “The meaning of a word must be asked for in the context of a proposition, not in isolation” (1884, p. X/1997, p. 90). If the linguistic turn might be seen as originating in Frege’s context principle, then the narrative turn might be seen as having a source in Danto’s context principle, the story we tell about both of these, as well as their interconnection, itself illustrating Danto’s principle. Telling such a story would also be a way of explaining how Danto’s philosophy of history counts as ‘analytic’: it has its place in a broader story about analytic philosophy.¹⁸

At the end of his first chapter on ‘Substantive and Analytical Philosophy’ (from which we have just quoted), Danto states that one of the main purposes of analytical philosophy of history is to clarify the ‘mode of co-ordination’ of events that characterises history (i.e., history-writing). We have to wait until chapter 8, the key chapter of the book on ‘Narrative Sentences’, however, for this clarification to be provided. The most general characteristic of narrative sentences, Danto writes, is that “they refer to at least two time-separated events though they only *describe* (are only *about*) the earliest event to which they refer” (2007 [1965], p. 143). To take one of Danto’s own examples, ‘The Thirty Years War began in 1618’ refers to two events, the beginning and end of the war, but is only about the first (ibid., p. 152). Furthermore, the description of the earlier event, ‘the beginning of the Thirty Years War’ is not one that could have been used prior to the occurrence of the second event. In narrative sentences, two (or more) events are co-ordinated, but in such a way that the earlier can only be described in the way it is from a perspective informed by knowledge of the later.

Narrative sentences are the linguistic vehicles that instantiate Danto’s general insight and context principle: events are continually re-described from later perspectives, revealing their significance through the stories that are told. Furthermore, by being re-described, they can be subsumed under appropriate general laws: this is how Danto sought to bring narratives under Hempel’s covering-law model of explanation. There is no limit to such re-descriptions and possible explanations, each of which may further enrich our knowledge of an

¹⁸ For one such account, see Vann 1995.

event. The past is open, then, to the future – to the narratives that historians construct.

As mentioned above, Danto's book was republished in 1985 as *Narration and Knowledge* with three additional chapters. In the second of these, 'Historical Language and Historical Reality', Danto argues that just as the past is open to future descriptions, so is the present open to descriptions of the past. We make sense of the present by telling stories that relate us to the past. These stories reflect beliefs about the past, and these beliefs, Danto writes, "penetrate the language we use even to describe objects contemporary with those descriptions" (2007 [1985], p. 336). In our own stories we take these beliefs to be true, but as soon as those beliefs are questioned, then we have to revisit the past to resecure our present. As Danto concludes the chapter, "The present is clear just when the relevant past is known" (*ibid.*, p. 341).

9 Applying Danto's ideas

With this briefest of sketches of Danto's analytic philosophy of history in mind, let us re-describe some of the key points made earlier in this paper. We began with Frege's use of 'elucidation', which I suggested must be seen as having an historical dimension. In order to make his own ideas clear ('present' as they were then), Frege accepted that he needed to place them in an historical story, showing how they improved on the corresponding ideas of earlier philosophers. Furthermore, in stressing that it may take hundreds of years to achieve "knowledge of a concept in its purity", he can be taken to have recognized that the past is open to future descriptions.

The general insight which Danto expressed at the beginning of his book is central to the justification for rational reconstruction, upon which analytic philosophers from Russell onwards have placed such emphasis. The significance of philosophical ideas can indeed only be appreciated and evaluated in the light of later information, and those ideas may need to be rationally reconstructed into some kind of system – drawing on conceptual resources not available at the time – for assessment to properly take place.

However, the same can be said of ‘historical reconstruction’, as that has typically been understood in contrast to rational reconstruction. Attempting to understand a philosopher’s view in historical context may also require knowledge that would not have been available at the time. So Danto’s general insight does not give more support to rational as opposed to historical reconstruction. Genetic narratives as well as justificatory accounts may equally need the benefit of hindsight.

It should also be clear that the ground for Danto’s narrative turn was prepared by the earlier linguistic turn that Wittgenstein effected (with roots, too, in the work of Frege and Russell). Danto’s book is full of the attention to language that characterizes analytic philosophy after the linguistic turn, and could well be described as offering a critique of historical language. Danto criticizes ‘substantive’ or ‘speculative’ philosophy of history and seeks to diagnose certain confusions about the ‘logic’ of historical discourse.¹⁹ We might also redescribe Wittgenstein’s later talk of inventing ‘fictitious natural history’, to loosen the grip that certain concepts may have on us, as constructing narratives about alternative forms of life, in which different concepts developed.

We have already noted how analytic philosophy only began to be recognized as the tradition we know it today at least thirty years after its supposed origins, confirming Danto’s view that judgements of significance can only be made with sufficient historical distance. It is also not surprising that it then took at least another 30 years for the historical turn in analytic philosophy to occur. There needed to be a number of narratives on the table for questions to arise as to their legitimacy, and for historical reconstructions to kick in to correct rational reconstructions. We can now see, for example, that Dummett’s 1973 interpretation of Frege as a philosopher of language was a child of its times – when semantic theorizing took off in Oxford in the 1970s. Once the presuppositions of semantic theory itself were questioned and investigated, so too were its supposed origins in the work of Frege.

¹⁹ This is perhaps clearest in the ‘redescription’ of his project that Danto provided in the additional chapter on ‘Historical Language and Historical Reality’ in *Narration and Knowledge*.

Finally, we might note that Danto's views give support to the 'hermeneutic variant of intrinsic historicism' mentioned at the end of §7. If philosophy is a 'conversation with tradition', then reassessing the past in the light of later information is something that goes on all the time in philosophizing. Furthermore, to talk of essentially contested concepts is to talk of concepts that are revisited, reconstructed and redefined over and over again in the history of philosophy. Indeed, one might be tempted to characterize them as 'narrative concepts', concepts that are central to stories that are told about the history of philosophy and that we need to elucidate in locating our own projects in the historical space of philosophy. We cannot fully explain our key concepts (such as those of logic or analyticity) without referring to the related concepts that past philosophers had. Modifying Danto's characterization of narrative sentences, we might say that narrative concepts refer to at least two time-separated concepts though they only *denote* one of the concepts to which they refer – the latest concept if we are using it to expound our present views, and an earlier one if we are discussing the views of a past philosopher. Even when we are philosophizing ourselves (in the present), then, there will always be implicit reference to the concepts of the past.

10 Conclusion: reinvigorating analytic philosophy of history

We have seen how Danto's ideas can be applied in redescribing some of the points made in earlier sections of this paper. They also apply to his own work: we can now redescribe his book as helping inaugurate the narrative turn, for example. But fifty years on, what significance might be accorded to his 'analytic' philosophy of history?

In his preface to *Analytical Philosophy of History* Danto describes analysis in general as yielding "a descriptive metaphysic when systematically executed". His own book, he goes on, "is an analysis of historical thought and language, presented as a systematic network of arguments and clarifications, the conclusions of which compose a descriptive metaphysic of historical existence". (2007 [1965], p. xv) Some analytic philosophers might prefer 'revisionary' to 'descriptive' metaphysics, to use the distinction made famous by P. F. Strawson

(1959), and some might repudiate metaphysics altogether, but many analytic philosophers would have little objection to what Danto says here. Described like this, there seems an important role for analytic philosophy of history to play.

In the first chapter Danto spells out his conception in more detail. Analytical philosophy of history, he writes, is “philosophy applied to the special conceptual problems which arise out of the practice of history as well as out of substantive philosophy of history” (2007 [1965], p. 1). He then criticizes substantive philosophy of history for doing more than giving accounts of past events: it also tries, illegitimately, to offer accounts of the whole of history, which includes making *prophecies* about the future (ibid., pp. 1, 9). Analytical philosophy, on the other hand, as noted in §8 above, restricts itself to clarifying the ‘mode of co-ordination’ of events (ibid., p. 15). Since our knowledge of the past is limited by our ignorance of the future, according to Danto, identifying this limit is the “special business” of analytical philosophy of history (ibid., p. 16).

Danto says no more about what analytical philosophy of history is in the rest of the book. But it is clear that narrative sentences are central to his conception. For if what they involve is reference to at least two time-separated events while only describing the earlier one, then there is a complexity here that requires analysis to elucidate. This is just what Danto’s book seeks to provide, in the ‘systematic network of arguments and clarifications’ of which he spoke in his preface. So it is entirely appropriate to characterize his philosophy of history as ‘analytical’. But if this is so, then there is a genuine field of analytic philosophy of history that does not deserve to have been occluded when the narrative turn was taken, and which is also independent of the (problematic) approach taken by Hempel.

Returning to analytic philosophy today, then, and to historiographical debates after the historical turn, in particular, it is clear that there is a host of issues for an analytic philosophy of history to address. Some have been illustrated in the present paper, most notably, concerning Frege’s use of historical elucidation, conceptions of rational and historical reconstruction and their relationship, and different forms of historicism. In general, if philosophy has a more historical dimension than analytic philosophers have traditionally

recognized, and Danto is right that “The present is clear just when the relevant past is known” (ibid., p. 341), then there is much work to be done in exploring the logical connections between past and present concepts, sentences and whole discourses (including narratives themselves). The historical turn in analytic philosophy, then, opens up the possibility of reinvigorating analytic philosophy of history and deepening understanding of philosophical historiography.²⁰

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²⁰ This paper originated in a talk given at the conference on ‘Philosophy, Theory and History in Germany since 1945’ in Bochum in September 2014, organized by Timothy Goering. I would like to thank participants at the conference for helpful discussion, and Timothy Goering and Frank Ankersmit for their comments on a first draft of this paper.

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